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C O N F I D E N T I A L YEREVAN 000885

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [AM](#)

SUBJECT: DEFENSE MINISTER ON DOMESTIC SITUATION

Classified By: Ambassador John Ordway for reasons 1.5 (B, D)

1. (C) Defense Minister Serzh Sargsian joined the Ambassador in opening a EUCOM-funded hospital renovation on April 14. During the course of the event, the Ambassador had a 30-minute one-on-one conversation with him. On the issue of the dispersal of the anti-Kocharian demonstration on April 12, Sargsian was uncompromising. He defended the need to clear the streets, and blamed the opposition for creating a situation in which the authorities had no other course they could take. He pointed out that they had not interfered in the April 9 rally, nor had they acted in any way against the "sit-in" conducted in the square adjacent to the Opera House. They also had not acted to prevent the march up Baghramian to the blocking point in front of the U.S. Embassy -- and had let the rally continue for over eight hours. It was not, he argued, that the government was trying to stifle the opposition in expressing its views. Rather, in his analysis, the opposition had deliberately and purposefully chosen to conduct the Baghramian demonstration because the authorities had not reacted to the previous demonstrations. For their own purposes, he said, they needed a reaction from the government that would, in their concept, stimulate further mass support from the populace. Sargsian charged that in this analysis, the opposition had been gravely mistaken: there was not overwhelming support for them in the population.

2. (C) The Ambassador told Sargsian that it was now imperative to begin a dialogue with the opposition, and take steps to involve them in productive political activity. Sargsian immediately responded that the opposition was not interested in a dialogue. The Ambassador said that this was correct, but only for now. It was important for the authorities to now reduce the pressure, release detainees, and stop raiding political party headquarters. If this were done, it would create conditions that would be conducive to the dialogue. Sargsian immediately responded, "of course, we will do all that." He then veered off onto charges that at least elements of the opposition were violent, had committed criminal acts, and that calls for violent overthrow of the President were themselves criminal acts. The Ambassador again urged that the police and prosecutors not pursue the vast majority of opposition figures who were using non-violent, political means. Although he expressed continuing skepticism about whether the opposition would ever be prepared to enter into a dialogue, he reiterated that they intended to follow the very course the Ambassador had outlined.

3. (C) Comment: Compared to the discussion with President Kocharian on April 13, Sargsian was if anything more intense on the culpability of the opposition, and on the need for tough measures to counter them. However, unlike the President, he gave no sign that there was any consideration to continuing legal actions against the opposition. While Kocharian was talking in terms of lessening the pressure if and only if the opposition engaged with the governing coalition, Sargsian presented that course as a matter of fact.

ORDWAY